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Ontological Nihilism
How Hegel was read by Nietzsche

By

Viriato Soromenho-Marques
(University of Lisbon)

If we wish to find a topic that arises and crosses through the whole vast and fragmentary philosophical work written by the hand of Friedrich Nietzsche, I think that the concept of Nihilism complies most adequately with this requirement.

I do not share the idea, according to which, Nietzsche so arduously transported materials to the ultimate goal of building another philosophical system but was prevented from doing so precisely because his intellectual health abruptly collapsed. On the contrary, I am deeply convinced that many of the most known hermeneutic endeavours massed around the work of Nietzsche confuse a systematic critical approach with a systematic constructive project. When, for example, we read the majors essays of Heidegger or Deleuze on Nietzsche we are scarcely able to find the undecided 'system' of Nietzsche, although we may surely recognize the features of the interpretative strategies developed both by Heidegger and Deleuze in so many other philosophical landscapes (Heidegger, 1961; Deleuze, 1977).

Nevertheless, we may and must perceive some strong semantic zones, some hard conceptual bones, upon which Nietzsche organized the tissue and flesh of his own creative reflection. The category of Nihilism certainly belongs to that solid ground, and I allege that the problems and conceptual representations covered by that word were already in the

mind of the author even before the formal emergence of the term in Nietzsche's glossary drawn up in the 1880s (Soromenho-Marques, 1984: 180-206).

I consider it to be very significant that, probably, the best definition of Nihilism offered by Nietzsche can be found by following an indirect path. In fact, Nietzsche wrote more clearly about the psychological configuration of the type-of-person who is caught in the values and moral web of Nihilism than about the web of Nihilism itself.

In a text dating probably from the Autumn of 1887 we may read the following definition:

“Ein Nihilist ist der Mensch, welcher von der Welt, wie sie ist, urtheilt, sie sollte nicht sein und von der Welt, wie sie sein sollte, urtheilt sie existirt nicht.”(*Nachgelassene Fragmente* [NF], 12, 9[60], 366).

What is the psychological content of Nihilism captured by this definition of the person who acts (in)voluntarily as a Nihilist? I think the answer is deeply connected with the impossibility of accepting the burdens of the real world, with the refusal to embrace the concrete (dis)order of things, as they are disclosed in the sphere of worldly sensitive experience, as the crucial point of departure for everything else within the reach of human creative powers.

The essence of Nihilism is about the way humans and their philosophical constructs, particularly those pertaining to Western European culture, are (not) able to deal with concrete things, or, using more technical terms, Nihilism is the umbrella-like inception for a set of negative answers given the theoretical and practical challenges (re)presented by the category of the concrete as a vital ontological predicament of the Being as a whole.

The dialogue between Nietzsche and Hegel I would like to put forward in this paper finds its extensive starting point here on the grounds of two main reasons. Firstly, we have to acknowledge the fact that Hegel was a major contributor to the development of Nietzsche's philosophical tools and problems. There is a profound connection between the Hegelian dialectical *Weltanschauung* and the Nietzschean criticism directed against the metaphysical tradition and way of thinking as a part of the Nihilist constellation. Secondly, it is because the conceptual cutting edge between both thinkers leaning towards the status of concrete things and

individual beings is located precisely in the realm of Nietzsche's doctrine on Nihilism.

In order to identify the main characteristics of the Nietzsche's reading of Hegel we will follow both authors on two central issues:

a) The meaning of ancient Greek Tragedy.
b) The ontological status of historical time and individuality.

1. **The meaning of Ancient Greek Tragedy**: Some months before his intellectual breakdown, Nietzsche wrote in the pages of *Ecce Homo* the following statement concerning his book on the birth of the Greek Tragedy (*Die Geburt der Tragödie*) published in 1872: "It smells badly of Hegelianism" *(sie riecht anstössig Hegelish*) (*Ecce Homo*, KS, vol. 6: 310).

This remark is important for several reasons because it clearly shows that while arriving at the high moment of his philosophical work, Nietzsche was able to acknowledge his deep, plural theoretical debt towards Hegel, even in the early days of his seeming loyalty to Schopenhauer's heritage.

In the Nietzschean *Die Geburt der Tragödie*. Hegel was, above all, an influential factor working inside the realm of structural ideas and methods. On the surface, Nietzsche's stand when facing Hegel was one of disagreement on the basis of his general refutation of Socratism and its legacy.

We therefore need to search deep into the roots of the thematic sphere of Tragedy in order to disclose the essential features of Hegel's early influence on Nietzsche.

The crucial purpose of Nietzsche in his voyage around the origins and meaning of ancient tragedy was his effort to understand, rather than explain, the process by which the aesthetic expression of life as a whole suffered a shift from a global approval of existence into a mere engineering of logical representation. The turning point that drove tragic drama from Aeschylus to Euripides meant to Nietzsche the decline of the power, in artistic terms, to accept and manifest the stream of life in all its contradictory predicaments, both as a source of joyful hope and as cause of pain and fear.

The dramatic pristine tools of Greek tragedy were able to face all the angles of existence affirmatively, including the shadows of oblivion and death kept at bay by the will for renewal and rebirth. Euripides and Socrates appeared as the sophisticated conceptual refusal of such an intense and harsh view of life. 'The theoretical human being' (*theoretischer Mensch*) as an ideal and Type (*Typus*), allied to an optimistic ethical doctrine of salvation, signified the collision of the abstract search for tranquillity and quiet certainty with the brave acceptation of what we may call an ontology of the concrete: the affirmative welcoming of being in all its grim and painful requirements (*Geburt der Tragödie*, KS, vol. 1, chap. 15: 98).

To fulfill his central aim within the realm of his studies on ancient tragedy, Nietzsche walked very close to the trail opened up by Hegel some decades before. We may find clear evidence in the following chapters:

1.1. Nietzsche undertook a dualistic, symbolic approach to the semantic core of ancient Greek tragedy, embodied in the entities of Apollo and Dionysus. It was largely dependent on the work of Hegel who, since his youth, had struggled to overcome the narrow limits of the idea of rationality as it was developed in the Modern Western philosophical tradition after Descartes. Hegel refused to accept the confusion between reason (*Vernunft*) and understanding (*Verstand*). Reason should not be restrained by the boundaries of those intellectual categories condemned to the architectonic limits of representation (*Vorstellung*). On the contrary, the task of reason was to translate, by positive 'exposition' (*Darstellung*), the forms and figures (*Gestalten*) most likely to bring Being as a whole, in all its requisites and characteristics, into the light of thought.

1.2. Hegel radically inverted the Kantian thesis about the dialectical destination of reason. Instead of Kantian negative self-discipline against the danger of illusion and fantasy, Hegel gave a broad positive sense to both the objects and methods of dialectical reason. It should be underlined that in the same direction, the relationship between the two main Nietzschean figures (*Gestalten*), Apollo and Dionysus, was developed in a very similar way to that used within Hegelian dialectics, stating that Apollo and Dionysus were not opposite notions prone to mutual exclusion. Conversely, Nietzsche sustained his argument that the aesthetic appraisal of concrete existence could only be obtained inside a complex movement where both entities would submit each other to a

kind of mutual negation and mutual conservation. This was in a sense that reminds us of the Hegelian concept of *Aufhebung*.

1.3. Both Hegel and Nietzsche coincide in the refusal to identify human rationality with the basic intellectual capacity of calculation. They do not belong to the lengthy, far-reaching modern school of post-Cartesian thought which has tried to make the philosophical research for values and truth comply with the paradigms of mathematical accuracy developed by algebra and physics. The preeminent role played by the category of causality has been the result of an error of perspective induced by the confusion between reason (*Vernunft*) and understanding (*Verstand*), unable to express the endless tonalities of the Being.

The young Nietzsche, if challenged to define the essence of truth would certainly not refuse the definition written by Hegel in the preface of his 'Phenomenology of the Spirit' (*Phänomenologie des Geistes*): "What is true therefore is the bacchanal delirium" (*Das Wahre ist so der bacchantische Taumel*, Ph.G., Werke, vol. 3: 46). By that expression in 1807, Hegel meant what was already bright and clear for young Nietzsche in 1872: in order to remain faithful to the pursuit of truth in its concrete plurality philosophy should embrace, and not refuse, the tragic sides of existence.

2. **The ontological status of historical time and individuality**.

The philosophical cutting edge that separates Nietzsche from Hegel is located in the acute question about the ontological status of the individuality.

The theoretical collision route of both thinkers was already tangible while Nietzsche was working on his second *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*. In a text drafted in 1873, the future author of *Zarathusthra* distinctly explained what the main disagreements were that drove him apart from Hegel in the field of the philosophy of history, more precisely in the chapter concerning the role of singular persons in the historical process.

Let us look at his words:

"[...]gesetzt es gäbe einen Weltzweck, so wäre es unmöglich ihn zu wissen, weil wir Erdflöhe und nicht Weltregierer sind. Jede Vergötterung der abgezogenen Allgemeinbegriffe, Staat, Volk, Menschheit,

Weltprozess hat den Nachteil, die Bürde des Individuums kleiner zu machen und seine Verantwortung zu erleichtern [...] In's Moralische gewendet: wer dem Menschen den Glauben nimmt, dass er etwas Fundamental-Werthvolleres sei als alle die Mittel zu seiner Existenz, der macht ihn schlechter[...]" (NF, vol.7, 29[74]: 662).

In the extremely rich quotation mentioned above, Nietzsche once again calls up the echoes of the debate on the philosophy of history going back and forth during the Enlightenment and makes it the heart of his discussion The impossibility of opening time maps of providence, the absurdity of transferring subjective and human predicaments to instrumental institutions like the State, the appeal to human limits and shortcomings -- all these semantic shades and tones breathe new life into important contributions put forward previously by Voltaire, Mendelssohn and Herder.

The most noteworthy peculiarity is probably the last remark about the equation between the narrow boundaries of human knowledge and the historical, ethical responsibility of individuals. In calling our attention thus, Nietzsche transports us into a kind of deviated Kantian atmosphere. He asserts that humans depart from their own limitations and ontological faults in order to gain their dignity through the risk of self-government and decision, even against a background of uncertainty. Needless to say, here is an argument about the metaphysical properties of the Self. What is really at stake both for Nietzsche and for Kant, - and certainly against the principles that constitute the core of the Hegelian philosophy of history - is the common assessment whereby the historical responsibility of individuals is not a burden; it is not a mere reflex of ignorance or a pale image of our most secondary role in the historical drama. The idea of personal responsibility is the borderline between a true ethic life and the trend of modern forms of Nihilism, which are bent on avoiding the high price and ordeal of responsibility and decision. The exercise of responsibility is the solid basis upon which human value is grounded, even if the guiding star leads to the search for a new moral foundation of humanity "beyond good and evil".

We may therefore see the perfect combination between the applause given concrete and empirical reality -- according to Nietzsche's conception of the tragic character of existence, as we have seen above -- with the approval of concrete persons, real human beings caught up in the flows of time-and-space, like sailors in an Ocean without previously drawn-up navigation charts.

The basic principle of Nietzsche's anthropology is therefore the primacy of the real and concrete human being, and not the abstract and empty ideal of humanity:

“Mein Schlusssatz ist: dass der wirkliche Mensch einen viel höheren Werth darstellt als der 'wünschbare' Mensch irgend eines bisherigen Ideals[...]”, (NF, vol. 13, 11 [118]: 56).

In his last year of intense intellectual work, Nietzsche returned once again to the topics where a dialogue with Hegel was immediately possible. In an impressive short text about the concept of progress he delivered the following thoughts:

“Fortschritt. [...] das neunzehnte Jahrhundert ist kein Fortschritt gegen das sechszehnte Jahrundert; und der deutsche Geist von 1888 ist ein Rücktritt gegen den deutschen Geist von 1788... Die 'Menschheit' avancirt nicht, sie existirt nicht einmal...Der Gesamtaspekt ist der einer ungeheuren Experimentir-Werkstätte, wo Einiges gelingt, zerstreut durch alle Zeiten, und Unsägliches missräth, wo alle Ordnung, Logik, Verbindung und Verbindlichkeit fehlt...”, (NF, vol.13, 15 [8]: 408-409).

Instead of a providential universal plan, the outlook of human history was similar to that of a gigantic laboratory. Theodicy was a good device for overcoming the panic caused by the overwhelming presence of the evil hues and shades of the human experiment. But for Nietzsche, the justification of evil was merely a kind of philosophical fiction, an artificial intellectual creation along the lines of the regulatory ideas proposed by Kant in the *Kritik der reinen Verunft*. The Hegelian stand was completely different. Hegel believed ostensibly in the existence of a world plan (*Weltplan*) which, within its historical development, brought the transparency that would transform itself into an object open to the eyes of a keen dialectical reasoning. More than that, however, Hegel's theodicy and philosophy of history were the places wherein universal history attained self-consciousness and fulfilled itself. For Nietzsche such a conception was the result of a complete and astonishingly logical hubrys.

According to Nietzsche, history was made by individual endeavours which could hardly be evaluated in terms of progress. To Nietzsche, the purpose of positive, constitutive history as the work of an ambiguous supra-human reasoning represented a Hegelian capitulation before the

metaphysics he had helped to shake by their very roots through the emphasis he had placed on the temporal and historical essence of existence and Being as a whole.

The revolution introduced by the Hegelian dialectics was the radical shift from *Sein* to *Werden*. But at the end of the road, the concepts used to express the temporal movement of the Being as *Werden* became crystallized and paralyzed in the dreams of the Absolute in its several faces. The ideal creations of the Hegelian system had become concrete, universal forms which were considered to have more life than the abstract universal entities of the singular and fragmentary experience of concrete human beings. In conformity with a Nietzschean interpretation, the next Hegelian step was to invert the relationships between humans and their historical creations, such as the State, turning the former into instruments of the latter, and understanding it as the embodiment of an independent rational teleology.

In a certain way, we may compare the Nietzschean stand regarding Kant with his stance towards Hegel. According to Nietzsche, both thinkers refused to accept the consequences of their major achievements.

Kant was the rebel 'fox' who freely returned to his cage after the daring feat of destroying the metaphysical grounds on which the substantive idea of God was based. (*Die fröhliche Wissenchaft*, KS, vol. 3, § 333: 562).

Hegel was the agitator who opened the doors of the extensive realm of ontology to both the strength of time and the concrete features of Being. He finally became his own prisoner, caught up in his majestic system where the abstract became concrete and the concrete became disposable.

I therefore propose the term, ontological Nihilism, as the expression that best suits a Nietzschean interpretation or reading of Hegelian philosophy.

In screening the vast amount work produced by Nietzsche, I subsequently discovered ten different modalities of Nihilism. They are as follows:

- *administrativer Nihilismus* (*Genealogie der Moral*, KS, vol.5, 316)
- *historischer Nihilismus* (*idem*.: 406)

- *beschaulischer Nihilismus* (*idem*)
- *ekstatischer Nihilismus* (NF, KS, vol.11, 35[82]: 547)
- *praktischer und theoretischer Nihilismus* (NF, KS, vol.12, 5[71]: 211)
- *die extremste Form des Nihilismus* (NF, KS, vol.12. 5[71]: 213)
- *aktiver Nihilismus* (NF, KS, vol.12, 5[71]: 216)
- *vollkommener Nihilismus* (NF, KS, vol.12, 10[42]: 476)
- *unvollständiger Nihilismus* (*idem*).

In referring to the notion of ontological Nihilism, I think we are better able to translate the different features of Nietzsche's stand regarding Hegel in their combination of admiration and disappointment. Nietzsche acknowledged in Hegel his extraordinary capacity to rock the structures of metaphysical western tradition, which were only one part of the larger Nihilism construct. Nevertheless, according to Nietzsche, Hegel was unable to live up to his promises and betrayed them within the fascinating maze of his dialectical system. What was lost in the Hegelian labyrinth was, above all, the abysmal nature of individuality transferred to the complexity of the system. The philosophical implications of Hegelian ontology was therefore the sacrifice of the concrete structure of individuality, including all its anthropological implications. The dialectical system showed a voracious desire to be rid of the "plurality of forces" (*Vielheit von Kräften*) striving for the formation of a "hierarchic order" (*Rangordnung*) (NF, KS, vol.11, 34 [123]: 461).

Hegel sacrificed individuality to the systematic organisation of his world, forgetting that each singular identity was, in itself, a world trying to reach some kind of balance and organisation.

In the struggle between the eternal contemplation of abstract ideas and the outstanding impetus of the concrete stream of existence, where entities rise and fade, where hope give place to despair and joy, at the end of his philosophical path, Hegel chose the calm waters of metaphysical certainty instead of venturing out to sail the troubled seas of post-Nihilism.

Viriato Soromenho-Marques

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